

Facts and Q&A about the 12-month finding On a petition to list the fisher

The fisher:

The fisher is a house cat-sized member of the family Mustelidae, which includes weasels, mink, martens, and otters. Fast, agile and adept at climbing trees, they eat any prey they can catch and overpower, including squirrels, hares, mice and birds.

Fishers occur in the northern coniferous and mixed forests of northwestern United States southward to central California and Wyoming, eastward to the Great Lakes and Appalachian regions, and New England. The West Coast population of fisher historically occurred both east and west of the Cascade Crest in Washington and Oregon, in northwestern California and in the southern Sierra Nevada range. In Washington, the fisher is considered either likely to have disappeared, or reduced to scattered individuals. The population in Oregon has also been much reduced, and the population in the southern Cascades of Oregon is descended from animals that were brought from British Columbia and Minnesota and reintroduced.

There is a population in the northern Siskiyou Mountains of southwestern Oregon and northern California, and a population in the southern Sierra Nevada. Recent surveys indicate that fishers appear to occupy less than half of the range they did in the early 1900s in California.

Questions and Answers

Q. Who submitted the petition to list the fisher?

A. The 20 petitioning organizations and individuals were the Center for Biological Diversity, the Sierra Nevada Forest Protection Campaign, Noah Greenwald, American Lands, Biodiversity Legal Foundation, Center for Sierra Nevada Conservation, Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center, Environmental Protection Information Center, Forest Issues Group, Friends of the Kalmiopsis, Klamath Forest Alliance, Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center, Natural Resources Defense Council, Northwest Ecosystem Alliance, Oregon Natural Resources Council, Plumas Forest Project, Predator Conservation Alliance, Siskiyou Project, Siskiyou Action Project, and Yosemite Area Audubon. They submitted their petition on November 28, 2000.

Q. What did the petition seek?

A. The petition asked the Service to list the fisher in portions of California, Washington and Oregon as an endangered species. It stated that the fisher has a low reproductive rate and low dispersal abilities. It also notes that the West Coast population is dependent on forests with dense canopy cover, ground structure, and sites for nesting and resting. The petition described the fisher's historical distribution and current range in California, Oregon, and Washington, stating that three populations remain: one in northern California/southwestern Oregon, one in the southern Sierra Nevada of California, and a reintroduced population in the southern Oregon Cascades. The petitioners cite a significant diminution of the fisher's range on the West Coast and ongoing loss of habitat as evidence to support a positive listing decision.

Q. What is the history of today's action?

A. Under the ESA, the Service is required to make an initial finding on a petition within 90 days. If the 90-day finding determines that the petitioned action may be warranted, the Service must complete a detailed assessment within 12 months. Due to other court-mandated deadlines, the Service was unable to address the petition within 90 days. As a result, the Center for Biological Diversity filed a lawsuit against the Service. On April 4, 2003, the U.S. District Court, Northern District of California, issued an order requiring the Service to complete a 12-month finding on the petition by April 4, 2004. On July 3, 2003, the Service published in the *Federal Register* a 90-day finding on the petition. Today's action, which finds that listing is warranted but precluded by other higher priority actions, completes the 12-month review.

Q. What does today's finding say?

A. The West Coast population of the fisher constitutes a distinct population segment (DPS) under the Endangered Species Act that should be listed either as threatened or endangered. The term "species" under the Act includes taxonomic species, subspecies and distinct population segments of vertebrate fish or wildlife. The Service's DPS policy, published in 1996, stipulates that a vertebrate population segment must be both discrete and significant for consideration for listing under the Act. As such, the Service considers information on genetics, behavior, distribution and ecology in determining whether a population is discrete and significant. After review of the best available commercial and scientific information available, the Service finds that the fisher is imperiled by habitat loss and fragmentation, small population sizes and isolation, human-caused mortality from incidental trapping, and vehicle collisions. Moreover, protection provided for the species by other Federal, State or local laws may be insufficient.

Q. Why can't the Service proceed with a proposed listing?

A. A proposal to list this species immediately is precluded by other higher priority listing actions. During the 2004 fiscal year, the Service must spend nearly all its Listing Program funding to comply with court orders and judicially approved settlement agreements, which now take highest priority.

Q. Could the fisher be introduced to re-establish populations?

A. State and Federal agencies are evaluating a strategy to re-establish populations of the fisher within its former range in California, Oregon, and Washington. In addition, the timber industry has indicated to the Fish and Wildlife Service that it would support an effort to establish additional populations of the fisher on timber company lands in an effort to conserve the species and preclude the need to list it. The Service believes these efforts have merit and encourages the continued efforts of State, Federal and nongovernmental organizations to develop and implement conservation measures that could improve the status of the fisher in its West Coast range. The Service will work with those parties interested in fisher conservation strategies, in an effort to eliminate the need for listing.

Q. Could a successful re-introduction program preclude the need to list the fisher?

A. The fisher has been extirpated from more than 80 percent of its former range in California, Oregon and Washington. In California, the fisher is no longer found in the central Sierra Nevada (from approximately Yosemite National Park north to Lassen National Park). Thus, a goal of recovering a population of this species in the central Sierra Nevada to "connect" existing fisher populations in the southern Sierra Nevada with the Klamath region would be an important consideration when evaluating the need to list this species. Several scientific questions would need to be resolved prior to implementing a strategy to establish additional populations of the fisher in the Sierra Nevada, including:

- Would animals be captured from the Klamath/Coastal areas and relocated to the central Sierra Nevada?
- Would captive breeding be better than capture and relocation?
- Is the population in the Klamath/Coastal region stable enough to allow some animals to be captured and relocated?
- How many animals would need to be taken and relocated to establish a viable population in the Sierra Nevada?
- Where is the best area to relocate animals?
- Is there sufficient habitat and prey base to meet the species needs?
- Are the genetics of Klamath/Coastal different or similar to the southern Sierra Nevada population?
- Would there be a threat of introducing a disease to the southern Sierra Nevada population?
- Will additional fisher populations impact other rare species like the pine marten?

The Fish and Wildlife Service currently implements captive breeding and relocation programs to conserve a variety of fish and wildlife species. Thus, with sound scientific input and advice, it is reasonable to believe this species could be repatriated to its former range and possibly avoid the need to list the species. The Service believes this effort will need the participation of the State wildlife agency, the federal land management agencies, as well as the support of conservation organizations and the timber industry in order to succeed.

Q. What is the fisher's status under State law?

A. The fisher is listed by the State of Washington as endangered. In Oregon, the fisher is designated a protected non-game species, and is listed as a "Sensitive Species – Critical Category." California lists the fisher as a "Species of Special Concern" and classifies it as a furbearing mammal that is protected from commercial harvest. The Oregon and California designations provide some protections to the fisher in the form of voluntary conservation efforts and minor fines for illegal trapping. The Washington designation provides additional protections in the form of more stringent fines for poaching and a process for environmental analysis of projects affecting the species. The Service has worked with the State of California to obtain and clarify species occurrence data.

Q. What happens now?

A. The West Coast DPS of the fisher is added to the list of candidate species. Service biologists will continue to monitor the status of this species and other candidate species. Should an emergency situation develop with one or more of the remaining populations, the Service will act to provide immediate protection.

More questions?

Write or call:

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